
The Outreach Volunteer Strategy

Increasing Recycling Participation Using Community-Based Social Marketing

Introduction

What strategies work to increase participation in community recycling programs? Many recycling program managers develop outreach initiatives based on information gained by word-of-mouth, through trade journals or by attending conferences. These are all important sources of information.

However, unbeknownst to many program managers, social scientists have been studying recycling behavior since the 1970's. In order to identify the barriers and motivations that are related to people's recycling habits, social scientists ask recyclers and non-recyclers questions about a wide variety of factors that might influence their recycling behavior. They then use statistical methods to determine which of these factors are linked to recycling participation and which are not.

Researchers have also evaluated the effectiveness of a variety of strategies to overcome barriers and strengthen motivations. This body of research can provide clear guidance to recycling managers who wish to improve participation in recycling programs.

This document first describes a particular barrier to be overcome and then a strategy that has been shown to be effective in doing that.

The Barrier: Lack of Knowledge

People's knowledge of how and/or what to recycle is linked to their level of recycling participation. As expected, those who are less knowledgeable recycle less or not at all.

- ◆ A study carried out in Somerset County, New Jersey found that those who were confident about their knowledge of how and what to recycle were significantly more likely to recycle than were those with less confidence, even among those who had a strong conservation ethic.¹
- ◆ A synthesis of research results from 67 studies of recycling behavior in drop-off and curbside programs indicated that knowledge of recycling had the highest correlation with propensity to recycle of all of the variables examined.²

Many communities devote the majority of their outreach budget to distributing information about how and what to recycle. While having access to information is essential, it is also necessary that residents use the information in order to become knowledgeable about recycling. How can recycling managers improve the likelihood that this recycling information will be absorbed and acted upon?

The Strategy: Combine Information with Personal Contact

Research on persuasion indicates that our contact with other people is a major influence upon our attitudes and behavior. One way of capitalizing on this fact is to recruit community outreach volunteers to provide recycling information to their neighbors.

Description

Outreach volunteers in Claremont, California provided non-recycling neighbors with a recycling information sheet and orange net recycling bags (the equivalent of our

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recycling bins) and verbally explained how important recycling was and how easy it was to recycle in the City's program. Furthermore, they handed the householder a persuasive written appeal to recycle.³

Benefits

Over a ten week period following the contact by the outreach volunteer, 58% of the former non-recycling households recycled at least once, and 28% recycled every week. For comparison, information sheets, bags and persuasive appeals were simply dropped off at the doors of another group of non-recyclers. Of this group, 38% recycled at least once during the follow up measurement period and 12% recycled every week.

Procedure

1. Recruiting Outreach volunteers and Identifying Non – Recyclers

In order to determine which households were recycling in the curbside program and which were not, observations of 200 households were made for four weeks in a row. These observations took about an hour per collection day. Households that had recycled at least once were contacted by the researcher and invited to act as outreach volunteers. The researcher would knock on the door, introduce herself as working on a project to increase recycling in the City and say something like this: "We've noticed your recyclables at the curb on trash day and we wish that there were more people like you. Our latest strategy to increase recycling is to have people who are already recycling explain to their neighbors how easy and important it is. I've got a list right here of ten of your non-recycling neighbors. Would you be willing to be a recycling outreach volunteer?"

Immediately upon agreement, the outreach volunteer packet was explained. Outreach volunteers were asked to try and approach their neighbors within two weeks. If, after three weeks, a completed checklist had not been received by the researcher, a brief written query was sent.

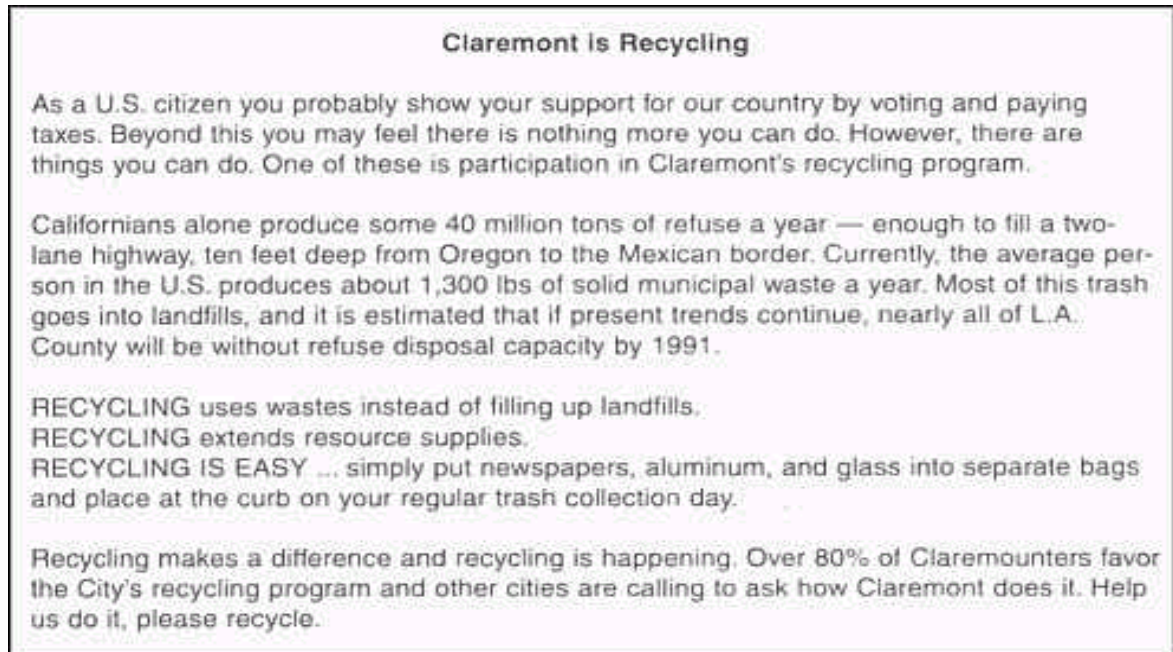
2. The Outreach Volunteer Packet

Outreach volunteers received a large envelope containing the following:

- a. A outreach volunteer checklist – a list of the addresses of non-recycling neighbors, with spaces to record the date and time of contact, and whether the contact was made in person, by phone, or by leaving the materials at the door with a personal note; and
- b. An instruction sheet – instructed the outreach volunteer to give each household contacted a recycling information sheet, three recycling bags, and a personal note if no one was at home after several tries. This sheet also instructed outreach volunteers to introduce themselves as a neighbor and explain their appointment by a city committee as "recycling outreach volunteer." They were then to verbally explain how important recycling is, how easy it is to recycle with the city program and to point out the list specifying the materials recycled by the city. This "speech" was to end with "I hope to see your bags out at the curb in a few weeks."; and
- c. Enough persuasive written appeals for each address on the list; and
- d. A self addressed stamped envelope so that the completed checklist could be mailed back to the researcher.

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3. The Persuasive Written Appeal



The appeal utilizes several principles of effective persuasion:⁴ 1) In order to capture people's attention, it presents information vividly (a two lane highway, ten feet deep.....); 2) it combines a moderate threat (LA County will be without disposal capacity...) with a clear action that can be taken to alleviate the threat (simply put newspapers, aluminum.....). Providing a clear course of action helps people feel that they have some ability to right the problem, increasing the likelihood that they will take action rather than avoid the whole issue; 3) Because people's behavior is influenced by what they consider to be "the norm" in their community, the appeal stresses that recycling enjoys broad support in Claremont.

Resources Needed

Staff time would be needed to monitor curbside recycling for non-recyclers and potential outreach volunteers, to prepare outreach volunteer packets and to recruit outreach volunteers. It took three to four hours to recruit eight outreach volunteers for the Claremont study. Staff time would also be required to follow up with outreach volunteers. Funds would need to be budgeted for outreach volunteer packets.

As carried out in Claremont, this strategy is staff time intensive. A number of steps could be taken to reduce the staff time needed. The staff time needed could be spread out over several years by implementing the strategy gradually until all community areas had been reached. Members of volunteer college or community service organizations could be employed to recruit the outreach volunteers. Members of volunteer groups such as the Boy or Girl Scouts could be trained to act as the outreach volunteers themselves.

Additional Research Needed

Recycling behavior was observed for only ten weeks after the contacts by the Claremont outreach volunteers. Therefore, it would be important to evaluate the durability of increased recycling participation over a longer time period.

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Secondly, it would also be beneficial to examine the costs and benefits of asking the outreach volunteers to contact all of the neighbors on their block, whether they recycle or not. Many recyclers do not recycle as much as they could. If personal contact can improve the chances that non-recyclers will utilize information provided to them, it may well do the same for recyclers.

Asking outreach volunteers to contact all of their neighbors would eliminate the need to prepare lists of non-recyclers' addresses. It would however, require each outreach volunteer to contact more people or require the recruitment of more outreach volunteers.

Thirdly, Claremont outreach volunteers presented their non-recycling neighbors with recycling containers (orange net bags). Communities may want to test the effect of delivering a recycling bin to non-recyclers who express interest in recycling but lack a bin.

Drop-off Communities The outreach volunteer strategy can also be employed in drop-off communities. In one study, recycling information combined with personal contact and a request for a commitment to recycle increased self-reported drop-off recycling among new residents by 88%, compared to less than 10% for those receiving written information alone.⁵

Evaluation Method

In order to rule out the possibility that changes in non-participants' recycling habits are due to factors other than the strategy, observations should be made in a pilot area and in a control area that is not exposed to the Outreach Volunteer Strategy. The two areas should be demographically similar. Because this strategy is time intensive, communities may wish to include only 100-200 homes in each area in order to test and perfect the technique before implementing it on a larger scale.

Baseline observations should be made for five weeks in each area before the strategy is implemented, and follow-up observations for five weeks after contact is made by the outreach volunteer. One week should be allowed between the date of contact by the outreach volunteer and the first follow up observation, so that households have time to accumulate some recyclables.

The difference in the percentage of recyclers in the strategy area before and after the outreach volunteer contact would be compared to any change in the control area during the same time period. If the change in the percentage of recyclers in the strategy area is greater than any change in the control area, it can be concluded that the effect is due to the strategy. If the strategy is effective, it would be beneficial to make observations for several more five week periods over at least a year's time, to determine if changes in recycling behavior persist.

If the outreach volunteers contact both recyclers and non-recyclers in their neighborhood, observations of both the presence and quantity (preferably the weight) of recyclables at each household will need to be made.

Drop-off communities can evaluate changes in the percentage of visitors from the outreach volunteer strategy area compared to the control area by asking all drop-off center visitors for their address during the baseline and follow up measurement periods. If this is considered too invasive, residents could be asked to indicate which part of town they are from.

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Questions?

Contact Brooke Nash of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Municipal Waste Reduction Branch, at 617-292-5984.

End Notes

¹Simmons, D & Widmar, R. (1990)

²Hornick, J. et. al (1995)

³Burn, S.M. (1991)

⁴McKenzie-Mohr, D. (1999)

⁵Arbuthnot, J. et. al. (1976-77)

References

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